

Let the astronomers gratify their perverted taste by having transits in their own houses, but let them understand that the Government will not lend itself to open and shameless astronomical junketing.

ANOTHER TRANSIT.

During Prof. PROCTOR's lecture last Thursday evening, he made an announcement which at once cast a gloom over the audience. He remarked, with studied carelessness, and as though it were an understood thing to which everybody was entirely reconciled, that the astronomers propose to have a transit of Venus in 1882. This is the first mention of the affair which has been made, and there is little doubt that Prof. PROCTOR has undertaken his present lecturing tour in order to publish in as quiet and impressive way as is practicable, the fact of the intended transit.

There can be, outside of astronomical circles, but one opinion in regard to this project. As they are now managed, the transits of Venus are expensive affairs, and they ought to occur—if at all—only at rare intervals. We had a transit only a very few years ago, and when the lavish extravagance with which it was conducted was severely commented upon by the press, the astronomers protested that they would not have another one during the present century. Two or three years later, they were guilty of the dishonest evasion of indulging in what they called a transit of Mercury, but which differed only in name from a transit of Venus. And now, encouraged by impunity, they boldly venture to violate their pledges, and to celebrate, openly and shamelessly, a transit of Venus in 1882.

Were the astronomers contented to celebrate transits of Venus at home, and at their own expense, the public would have no reason to interfere with them so long as they conducted themselves in an orderly and decent way. They might club together and hire a hall, where they could have the best transit that DELMONICO could furnish; or, if they preferred an open-air celebration, they could meet in the Adirondack Woods or at the Thousand Islands, and hold a scientific picnic of a week in duration. Provided they paid for their transits out of their own pockets, they might have as many of them as their means and health would permit, and no one would find any fault with them. When, however, they select places thousands of miles away, and demand that the Government should transport them thither at public expense, in order that they may have a transit of Venus unrestrained by the gaze of their fellow-citizens, and especially of their wives, they must expect an earnest protest from the friends of morality and economy.

The last transit of Venus was a recklessly-extravagant affair. Parties of astronomers were made up—some on the basis of whist and others on the basis of poker—and each party chose a distant and expensive country for the scene of its particular transit. Thus, one set of astronomers went to China, another to Australia, another to Kerguelen Land—places which they could not hope to visit at their own expense, and where they could throw aside all home restraints. The cost of transporting these parties, of supporting them for two or three months, and of bringing them back again, was paid by the Government. What has the Government to show in return for all this outlay? The answer will certainly not be very satisfactory to the tax-payers.

The astronomers alleged that they made extensive observations at China, Kerguelen Land, and elsewhere. It was supposed that they would settle by careful observation how many times a straight flush will occur when four men are playing, and would arrive at a definite conclusion as to whether the five, seven, and nine of hearts can be regarded as a stronger suit than the five, seven, and nine of clubs—neither being trumps. The records of the transit parties may be searched in vain for any such data. So far as they were concerned, we know no more of whist and poker than we did before they made those prolonged observations which so much excited the curiosity of the Chinamen and so materially altered the distribution of currency at Kerguelen Land. Did any of the astronomers observe any new and valuable varieties of tea or fire-crackers, or did they discover novel and entertaining animals at Kerguelen Land? They certainly did not. It is true that the Chinese party did bring home a collection of photographs which some innocent people believe to be of much scientific importance. It is difficult, however, to comprehend why photographs of Chinese milliners; views of the outside of the house at Peking in which the transit took place; and likenesses of the astronomers as they appeared when about to sit down to the celebration, can possess any permanent scientific value. There is no doubt that the astronomers had a delightful time, and that most of them now play a much stronger game than they did before going abroad, but the Government scarcely seems to have received its money's worth. As to the pretext that at every transit of Venus the distance of the sun from the earth is measured, no one can be deceived by it. According to the admissions of the astronomers themselves, the sun's distance has been measured times without number. Either it has been measured correctly, in which case it is useless to remeasure it, or else it has been measured incorrectly, which is a proof that the astronomers cannot do their work in a trustworthy way, and that it is not worth while for them to try it again.

Of course, the projected transit of 1882 is to be celebrated in the usual way. It is understood that most of the astronomers agree that Paris will be the best place in which to celebrate it, while a small minority think that it could be managed to better advantage at Rome. They will naturally expect to be sent abroad at public expense; supplied with enameled instruments with rounded corners, and anything else that is essential for making observations. They will come back with perhaps a more interesting collection of photographs than were brought back from China, and will announce that the sun is just as far off as it ever was. It remains to be seen whether Congress will overlook the violation of the pledge that no more transits should occur during the present century, and will consent to aid another transit celebration. The Federal Government was established for the purpose mentioned in the Constitution, and no one can pretend that the Constitution provides for defraying the expenses of astronomical orgies out of the Federal Treasury.